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Examiners' Report

Summer 2013

GCE Music Technology
Portfolio 2: 6MT03

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Summer 2013
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General Introduction

The submissions were of a similar standard to that shown in recent series. Recording work continues to show some excellent work at the top end, and generally this task is the best standard of the three tasks. Composing using technology again had a wide range of standards, at the top end centres are exploiting the use of technology in sound design, and putting this to good musical use on the context of compositions, but a significant number of submissions still ignore the requirement to get actively involved with creative sound design. The integrated sequencing task continues to be the weakest submission for most candidates.

Equipment levels show that centres are making suitable choices in the majority of cases. This was once an issue that affected candidates' ability to do the work to a suitable standard, but this is no longer the case. Recording equipment, sequencing programs and computer based instruments are now mostly of a suitable standard with the potential high quality work.

Where there is an issue is in the use of studio monitors and a suitable listening environment. Students should be encouraged to check all work on a regular basis using studio monitors not headphones, and final mixes of all tasks should always be completed on monitors. It is clear that some students complete mixes using headphones.

In a small number of centres, there is concern that proper data management including regular back-up and storage of students' work is not being managed. This means replacement work is not available when needed (e.g. in the case of CD errors), or partially completed work is submitted using data loss as a reason. As well as disadvantaging students, data management is a requirement of controlled conditions.

There are still a number of submissions that use downloaded midifiles for task 3A and shared audio by different candidates for both tasks 3A and 3B. This is plagiarism and can result in candidates being disqualified.

There were a small amount of other instances of non-permitted approaches, such as use of sequenced material in the recording task.

Log Books

The best log books supported the student's intentions and clearly presented their working methods. These were usually concise, well laid-out and structured, using the format of the log book as presented to centres, and highlighting important features rather than going into great detail about every aspect of the work.

Word processing parts of the document is acceptable, as long as the sheets are securely attached and labelled. Some centres have produced a pro forma

word doc or pdf for students to fill in on computer, and present these as printed stapled document.

Log books containing large amounts of screenshots and/or detailed commentaries on approaches to the work do not help the student display their good practice. The log book allows enough space for students to present their working methods and provide the examiner with all the information they need in a concise format.

Task 3A: Sequenced Integrated Performance

Headlines

- Missing or incomplete instrumental parts continue to be a problem
- Rhythm was frequently rigid and mechanical; incorrect drum patterns were common
- Musical subtlety and detail often lacking, lack of attention to articulation and dynamics
- Capture of audio mostly fairly good
- Integration of audio often had problems in balance, EQ, effects use and dynamics processing

The Look of Love (ABC) and Nobody's Diary (Yazoo) were offered for this year's cohort. These were more demanding musically than the previous year, and both had specific production features to recreate.

There was a lack of good quality work in this task. Many of the subtleties were omitted from student's work, with many basic errors in terms of musical accuracy and in re-creating production techniques.

The majority of work fell into the Adequate or Good Holistic descriptors (refer to mark scheme in Specification document), and displayed several of the weaknesses highlighted above.

Some commonly occurring features, good and bad, are listed below:

The Look of Love

- mistakes in bass part – the rhythm of this pattern caused problems for some; incorrect notes were common
- DX vibes – chords were often incorrect, or wrong inversions used
- the intro melody and rhythmic patterns were often incorrect
- drum patterns caused some problems, with errors in the kick being most frequent
- variations/rolls were usually attempted with varying success, though they often lacked shaping. The extravagant rolls towards the end were often correct rhythmically but unmusical and lacking shaping

- velocity shaping of Hi Hats was often handled poorly or not attempted at all
- the string parts were often handled fairly well though some layers were often omitted
- guitar parts were handled fairly well; shaping was more evident here than in drums, particular on the chorused rhythm guitar
- timbre choice was generally fairly good though when parts are missing this affects the timbre mark
- shaping to create suitable articulation of brass and bass lines was often misjudged with errors in note lengths
- dynamic variations were often fairly clumsy, contrasts between verse and chorus and breakdowns were not well managed
- vocal capture was usually handled fairly well, and the particular EQ and FX on certain BVs was attempted by most students
- vocal compression was often poorly handled, over-compression being the most common problem
- the balance and blend of the whole mix was rarely handled very well. Vocals were often isolated or dominant, and reverb used was inconsistent across the entire mix
- most students also recorded just vocals and backing vocals. These were suitable choices

Nobody's Diary

- vamp synth with filtering handled very well by some students; errors occurred in rhythm and chords in may cases though
- the flute-synth line incomplete/inaccurate/missing
- bass entry crescendos sometimes attempted, but few managed to be wholly convincing
- missing backing vocals was common; sequenced vocal aahs were often used but few candidates replicated the filtering on the original
- filtering of chorus vocals was usually attempted but often misjudged
- dynamic variations across the different sections of the song were seldom convincing
- velocity shaping on hi-hats usually received some attention
- vocal capture was usually reasonably good but suffered from a lack of decent compression and EQ
- balance and blend problems issues were fairly common
- most student recorded the vocal parts. This was usually fairly successful
- there were a lot of instances of 'phantom' synth parts that did not feature in the original

Task 3B: Multi-track Recording

Headlines

- Often the best response of the three tasks
- Some very impressive, high quality recordings are being produced
- Capture of instruments usually handled well
- Mix and production aspects tended to be less well executed than capture
- The tendency for massive over-compression and driving of levels beyond clipping is still all too common
- Some poor choices are being made to accommodate the acoustic instrument/percussion requirements, including modification of the stimulus for no good reason

Choice of song:
Pieces that contained brass sections, or rock songs with acoustic guitar, tambourine or shaker, and fairly straightforward production techniques consistently prove to be the best choices.
Successful entries chose material that was within the capabilities of the students (or other available musicians) in terms of performance.

Less successful choices included big band recordings with large horn sections that were mostly or entirely recorded in one room. This approach limits the ability to use processing tools to enhance the mix, and depends greatly on the acoustic of the room and interplay between microphones, and how well this is managed on the recording, which is often not that well. Another common approach was to adapt or re-arrange classic rock or pop songs to incorporate percussion – djembe or bongos plus cowbell, tambourine and/or shakers seems to be a popular choice. This creates a number of problems – arrangements using these instruments are often not handled well, the playing is often of a questionable standard, and they become hard to blend and balance in the mix. If they are not in the original, there is a good reason for that.

Some centres still ask large number of candidates to record the same song for Task 3B. There is potential for malpractice from the sharing of audio files if this approach is taken. Furthermore, it should be noted that candidates must plan and execute a recording project of their own devising, making decisions about how to capture the instruments. It appears that in some centres students use exactly the same microphone choice and placements for all recordings, which is not in keeping with the requirements of the task.

Capture

There is continuing evidence that centres are paying more attention to the recording environment, addressing the problems of recording in a classroom without treatment - even a simple duvet behind the vocalist helps. Some centres have obtained acoustic treatment to further control the recording environment.

There was good work on capture in general. Drum kit recordings have improved over recent years.
Some of the least successful recordings were of strings, pianos and percussion.

The use of amp modelling units for electric guitar capture seems to be declining, possibly as centres realise the advantages in capturing the sound of even a modest amp often produces better outcomes.

Noise was more of a problem than it should be using current digital equipment - usually careless distortion, top and tail of file or extraneous noise on acoustic guitars etc. Low level masters were also assessed in this component, and continue to be a regular problem.

Processing

EQ is one of the areas where there are often several significant misjudgements. The best candidates work showed that they had understood that cutting frequencies is often better than boosting. Many others used extreme settings that showed no real understanding of correct use.
Dynamics processing is a common problem area, with over-compression on bass and drums being common. Vocal compression was usually handled better, with some good work being seen in this area. Successful compression across the whole mix was unusual, and use of gates very rare. Poorly applied limiting to masters and poor use of multiband compression is still common.
FX was usually limited to reverb use, often with errors in judging amounts or matching ambience across the whole mix. Poorly recorded instruments with excessive ambience is also a regular problem. Other FX use was rare, apart from on electric guitar.

Mixing

Balance of instruments usually produced a few difficulties in placing at least some of the parts effectively. Problems frequently arose with vocal parts, drums, bass & kick drum, and while some examples of automation to control levels at suitable points were seen, many submissions could have spent more time on this aspect of the work.

There was some impressive work in blends of similar instruments such as backing vocals and horn sections, with percussion being the least successful.

Panning approaches were often sensible, with drum overheads handled well and suitable instruments placed centrally, though a few misjudgements often occurred such as instruments placed too wide in the mix and becoming isolated. Percussion was often handled poorly.

Acoustic Instrument/Microphone count/Track count requirements

Quite a number of entries did not not fulfil these requirements, which has a negative impact on the marks awarded. Examiners apply an adjustment based on subtracting $1/12^{th}$ for each missing track or instrument.

Task 3C: Composing Using Music Technology

Headlines

- Some very good work showing understanding of style and development of ideas
- Some entries showed very good ability to be creative with a range of sound design and manipulation techniques and combine it with imaginative, stylistic composition
- It is still common for candidates to ignore the expectation to explore sound design as an element of their work
- Some pieces ignore the requirement for the finished song to be 3 minutes long. This is part of the brief and is assessed
- Attention to general music production techniques often lacking – severe over-compression, distorted master, crude EQ, poor balance, untidy start and end edits
- Musical elements were often lacking control and development. Simplistic repeated patterns were common
- Sometimes students were too reliant on sample loops to create their musical parts. Creating a musical collage with loops cannot be credited as composition. Sample loops may be used, but must be significantly manipulated, and there should be significant original input in other parts. In some cases entire centres fell into this approach.

Responses to the briefs

The set text brief and the current affairs brief were attempted by roughly the same number of students. Probably only about 10% chose the moving image brief.

Brief 1 'The Picnic'

This was the first time a piece of film was offered as a brief for this task. It was a popular choice, though less popular than Chief Seattle's Speech.

Some very good, creative, imaginative work was done by the students at the top end. It was a challenging task, to incorporate modern style and sonics to what was essentially a period piece, but it was impressive how some students handled this, using the full range of synthesis, radical FX processing, audio manipulation and sampling.

The film provided plenty of cues to structure the music around, and clear moods as well as the 'time lapse/history repeating' theme, and most students managed to at least reflect the more obvious movements of the story. The best pieces exploited the detail in the story, and were full of development and variety.

Brief 2 'Chief Seattle's Speech'
This was probably the most popular of the three briefs, by a small margin. Students who attempted this brief clearly found some inspiration in the text, and managed to communicate some feeling and emotion in their pieces.

Typically, as with this brief in previous years, this saw a number of different approaches – rock band type song with several live parts; rap based vocals, sometimes using the RnB approach of having a sung refrain as contrast; heavily manipulated vocals, often spoken but chopped, glitched, effected to produce new timbres.

Some of the rock band type pieces missed the opportunity to explore sound design, instead taking a production approach similar to Task 3A combining live and sequenced parts. Basic mix effects do not count as sound design and manipulation. Similarly, some of the electronic styles used a very narrow range of technology – one or two vocals FX such as swampy delay and lo-fi/telephone EQ for example – but little else in terms of sound design. There was a fair use of cliché, as is to be expected, such as Native American flutes, drumming and chanting, but generally this was not over-used and other original ideas formed the greater part of the work.

Brief 3 'Prost can see Mansell in his Earphones'

This was the least popular of the three briefs, but only by a small amount, plenty of students opted to do this.
Candidates found a wide variety of quotes, mainly from commentators rather than sportsmen/women, and in the best work these were cleverly integrated into the composition using a variety of editing and manipulation techniques, producing samples that have strong rhythmic and/or melodic identity despite being derived from speech. It is pleasing to see these kinds of responses, which exploit technology in many different ways, showing a good appreciation of the approaches expected for this piece of work.

It was more common to see some decent integration of quotes without a really strong presentation of points of view, or a scattergun approach where quotes had little relevance to each other and did not tell much of a story.

The best responses often used electronic styles which allow for the use of technology in a wide variety of ways. Dubstep was particularly popular. It was rare for candidates to show real command of these approaches, though the best work was very convincing. Often there were a limited number of techniques used, or unsuccessful attempts at sample manipulation, creative fx use and synthesis. Many pieces had simplistic approaches to the music, a lack of understanding of style, with a few repeated beats and riffs plus pads or pedal notes and no real development.

Poor quality samples from You Tube often made the task difficult, but the best responses worked hard to minimise these problems using EQ and other editing techniques.

Musical elements

It was unusual to see work that displayed a real command of compositional processes, with style, variety and flow. Most pieces depended too much on repetition. Quite a large number of pieces were very basic, and struggled to make sense of the musical conventions of melody, harmony, rhythm.

The use of loops from sequencing software or libraries, displays a lack of creative input (particularly for beats) and will not gain credit unless there is further manipulation.

Many students again ignored the time requirement (3 minutes).

A small number of submissions failed to use the minimum number of parts. In these cases an adjustment was applied by subtracting $1/6^{th}$ of the total mark for each missing part.

Administration

It seemed fewer centres needed to be contacted for either replacement CDs with errors or in wrong formats, or for signatures on logbooks, which is welcome.

A small minority of centres were very careless with the CDs, submitting work that had clearly not been checked where mixes started or stopped halfway through, or vocals were left out of the Integrated sequence mix. Examiners contacted centres in these cases to request replacements and the correct mix was usually supplied on the replacement though sometimes the same or an even a more error-prone submission was received.

Some of the email addresses given by teachers were incorrect, again delaying the communication between examiner and centre. It is appreciated when centres deal with any problems swiftly and efficiently. Chasing missing/incorrect items is not part of the remit of examiners, but it is recognised as being more efficient than using the exam board's department that deals with this as examiners can more easily explain the details. Replacement items were swift to arrive in the vast majority of cases.

Some centres work arrived significantly late. This may lead to publication of results being delayed.

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